DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 727 PS 027 679

AUTHOR Hoyle, Sally G.
TITLE When Do I Go Home? Intervention Strategies for Foster Parents and Helping Professionals.
INSTITUTION Child Welfare League of America, Inc., Washington, DC.
ISBN ISBN-0-87868-762-9
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 42p.
AVAILABLE FROM CWLA, P.O. Box 2019, Annapolis Junction, MD 20701-2019; Tel: 800-407-6273 (Toll Free), 301-617-7825; Fax: 301-206-9789; e-mail: cwla@pmds.com; Web site: www.cwla.org ($6.95).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Biological Parents; Caregiver Child Relationship; Change Strategies; Child Welfare; Cultural Differences; Emotional Adjustment; *Foster Care; *Foster Children; *Foster Family; Helping Relationship; Intervention; Social Workers

ABSTRACT

Noting that meeting foster children's needs with sensitivity and compassion creates challenges for foster parents and helping professionals, this booklet narrates the experiences of two foster children to launch a discussion of challenges faced by foster children and appropriate child welfare intervention strategies. Part 1 tells the story of Karli and her infant brother Jon who are removed from their home in the middle of the night and placed in separate foster homes. Part 2 identifies nine challenges illustrated by the children's experiences and relevant caseworker strategies: (1) when a child is placed in foster care, a series of unpredictable events occur; (2) although foster parents and helping professions feel negatively toward the biological parent because of their abusive or neglectful practices, the child sees nothing wrong with their parent; (3) the child is accustomed to raising siblings; (4) the child hears adult conversation about him/her; (5) it is not clear where the parents are when the child is removed; (6) changing schools; (7) the child is wary about meeting new people; (8) cultural differences in food, clothing, and customs; and (9) the child experiences conflicting feelings about visitation. The booklet concludes with a list of print, website, and organizational resources. (KB)

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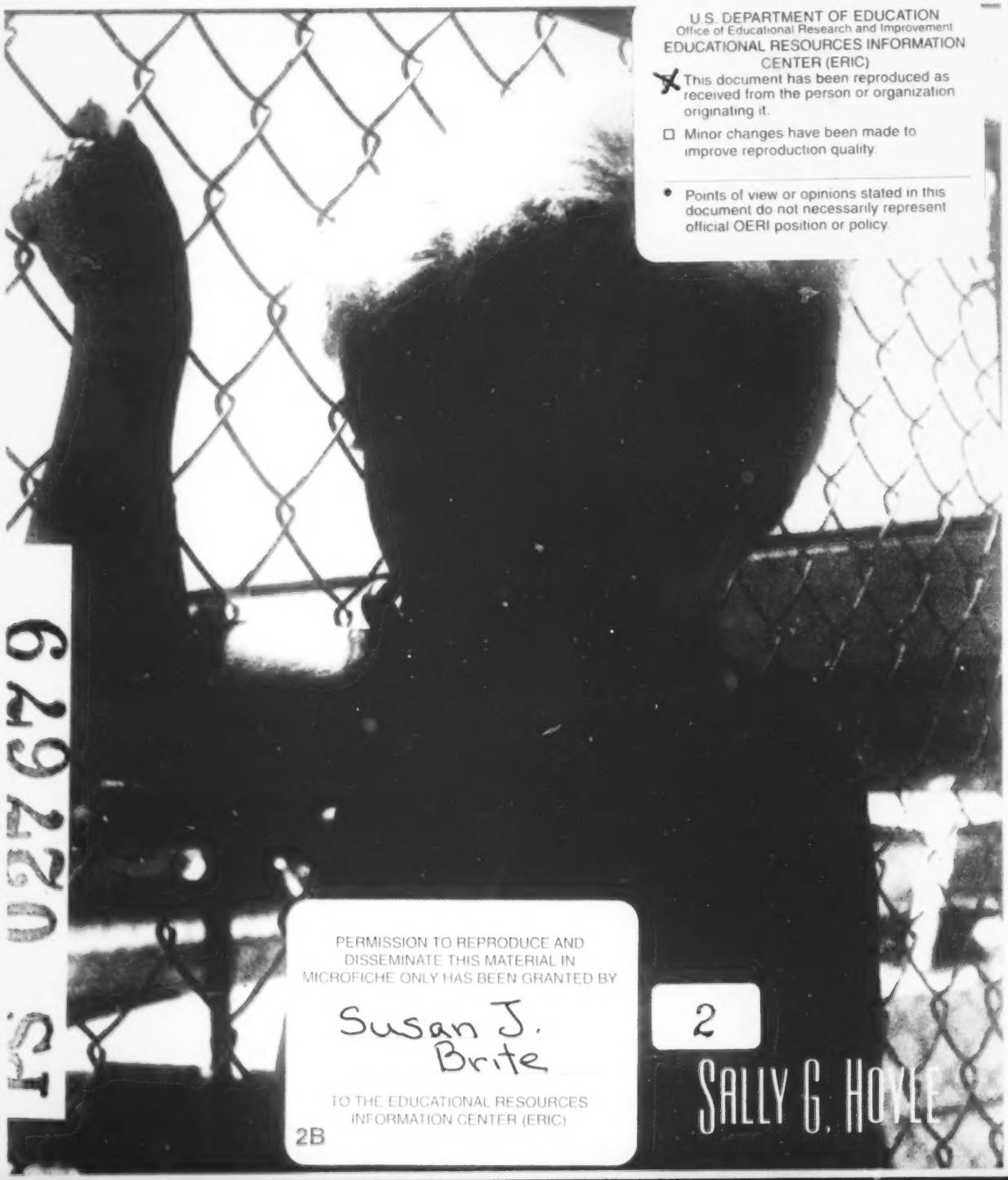
When Do I Go Home?

Intervention Strategies for Foster Parents and Helping Professionals



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When Do I Go Home?

Intervention Strategies for Foster Parents and Helping Professionals

Sally G. Hoyle

CWLA Press • Washington, DC

CWLA Press is an imprint of the Child Welfare League of America. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), the nation's oldest and largest membership-based child welfare organization, is committed to engaging all Americans in promoting the well-being of children and protecting every child from harm.

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CHILD WELFARE LEAGUE OF AMERICA, INC.
440 First Street, NW, Third Floor, Washington, DC 20001-2085
E-mail: books@cwla.org

CURRENT PRINTING (last digit)
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Luke Johnson

Cover photo: Tina Romero for the Arizona Department of Economic Security, Phoenix, AZ

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN # 0–87868-762-9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hoyle, Sally G.
When do I go home? : Intervention strategies for foster parents and helping professionals / Sally G. Hoyle
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-87868-762-9 (alk. paper)
1. Foster parents. 2. Foster children. 3. Foster home care.
I. Title.
HQ759.7.H69 1999 99-28335
362.73'3--dc21 CIP

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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the foster children, foster parents, and staff of the Beech Brook Treatment Foster Care Program in Cleveland, Ohio.

Sally G. Hoyle

Part 1:
When Do I Go Home?

Chapter 1

Karli sat in the social worker's office, wondering what would happen next. She'd been sitting there for hours since they picked her up at home. Mom was gone again, and someone must have called these people to complain because the baby was crying a lot. The social worker, Mr. Thomas, said nine-year-old girls were not supposed to be taking care of their baby brothers at 11:00 at night. Karli didn't know what the big deal was. She knew how to take care of a baby. She worried about where they had taken her brother Jon. Her mom would kill her if anything happened to him. The social worker said something about him seeing a doctor.

Karli looked around the room. Mr. Thomas left her some crayons and paper, but she didn't feel like coloring. She was thinking maybe her mom would come and pick them up. But deep down inside she knew that wasn't going to happen, and she was scared. She looked around. The office was a dump. Desks everywhere with papers piled on top of them. Karli saw some papers with her name and Jon's name on them. She was just starting to wonder why it said "Child Neglect" next to her name when Mr. Thomas returned with Jon.

"He's going to be fine. He has an ear infection," said Mr. Thomas. Karli reached for the baby, and Mr. Thomas handed him to her like he wasn't sure Karli knew how to hold a baby. Jon had on clean clothes that were a little tight on his long body.

"Where are his clothes?" asked Karli.

"We threw them away because they were so dirty," answered Mr. Thomas.

"But my mom bought that for him. She'll be upset if I don't bring the outfit home," said Karli.

"You're not going home, honey. Your mom isn't there, and we don't know how to find her. You're going to go to a foster home until we get this straightened out. Would you like to give your brother this bottle while I make some calls?"

"What do you mean we're not going home? My mom told us to stay there until she came home. We don't have any of our stuff. What about school? I have a book report to turn in," Karli whined.

"I know this is hard for you, Karli, but kids are supposed to have a parent to take care of them. Your mom has been having trouble with drugs. When parents take drugs, sometimes they don't do the things parents are supposed to do. It's my job to make sure you and Jon are safe, have food and clean clothes—and I did remember to get some clothes for you and Jon," said Mr. Thomas.

"But she left us food and I know how to cook. We don't mind her being gone. I'm old enough to take care of Jon. My mom said she is going to get her act together. Did you call my Auntie Jean? my grandma?" asked Karli. She was feeling a little bit angry with her mom. If she stayed at home more, maybe this would not have happened. Karli knew her mom was having problems. Her mom would come home high on drugs and bring a bunch of people she had never seen to have a party at their house. It would keep her and Jon up all night, then she'd fall asleep in school the next day. When she got home from school, her mom would be asleep, and Jon would be crying because his bottle was empty. Karli would clean him up and feed him or wake her mom up to get money to buy formula and food. Then her mom would go back to sleep while she played with Jon, did her homework, and cooked supper.

Sometimes her mom would be in a really good mood and have money. She would buy clothes and food and they would watch TV together. Lately, they missed these good times. Her mom didn't

have much money, she looked tired when she was awake, and she was gone more and more. Karli missed school sometimes because her mother didn't come home. The teacher would ask Karli why she didn't have a note from her mother, so Karli started writing fake notes herself. The teacher didn't say anything, but gave her a sad look.

Mr. Thomas was on the phone. "I have two children here. A girl who is nine and a boy who is nine months.... Oh, you could take the baby.... but we would like to place the two together... I'll call you back." This went on for awhile, and it made Karli feel like a prize on a game show or an item for sale on the home shopping network. She didn't understand why Mr. Thomas kept saying, "We'd like to place the two siblings together," because she didn't know what "siblings" and "placement" meant. Mr. Thomas talked about her like she was invisible. "They both seem normal... no developmental or behavioral problems.... need more attention...."

Earlier, Mr. Thomas gave her some chips, cookies, and juice from a snack machine. She decided to eat them now, since Jon had fallen asleep after his bottle. Karli wondered if he needed his diaper changed, but she decided to wait until Mr. Thomas got off the phone because she didn't see any diapers. Mr. Thomas looked really tense and seemed to be getting annoyed as he made the phone calls. It was so late that there was hardly anyone in the huge office building. Karli watched a custodian sweep the floors and fought to stay awake.

Chapter 2

Mr. Thomas finally got off the phone. Karli was so tired she had stopped paying attention to Mr. Thomas' chatter. Besides, she couldn't make sense of most of what Mr. Thomas was saying, and he seemed to be getting crabbier and crabbier as they sat in the office. Karli wondered if she had said or done something she was not supposed to.

"We're going to be leaving soon. I couldn't find a foster home that could take both of you, so you have to go to different places. Jon is going to go to the Moores and you are going to go to Ms. Evans. I have a bag here with a few of Jon's and your things that I picked up at your house, and I have some medicine Jon has to take. OK?" asked Mr. Thomas.

Karli didn't know what to say. She was trying to make sense of what Mr. Thomas was saying. It was bad enough that they were not going home, but now she and Jon had to go to separate places. Karli started to cry.

"I have to stay with Jon. My mother said. And he needs me. I take care of him," Karli said through her tears. Mr. Thomas handed her some tissues. Karli wiped her nose and asked for a diaper for Jon. As she changed Jon's diaper, Mr. Thomas said, "Someone else will be changing his diapers now. He needs a grownup to take care of you, too." Karli felt like her heart would break. She didn't know what to do. She looked down at Jon who continued to sleep. Her tears fell on his face. Karli wiped them away gently and followed Mr. Thomas out of the room. It was the worst day of her life.

Mr. Thomas picked up a car seat from a closet on the way out of the building.

"He may not like it. He's not used to riding in those things," said Karli.

"He needs to be in a car seat to be safe riding in a car. Don't worry, I'll take good care of both of you," Mr. Thomas responded.

They got in the car and headed through downtown. Karli scanned the streets looking for her mom. Jon slept in the car seat. They arrived at the Moore's house after midnight. Mr. and Mrs. Moore were in their bathrobes and seemed delighted to see Jon, even though he didn't wake up. They ignored Karli until Mr. Thomas introduced her.

"Karli has been taking care of Jon since he was born. It is hard for her to go to a different home tonight and let you take care of him. We would like Karli to visit Jon as much as is possible. Perhaps one of you could call Ms. Evans tomorrow to make arrangements," said Mr. Thomas as he lifted a few things out of a green trash bag.

Mrs. Moore sat down with Karli and told her she wished she could take them both, but they only had room for one child. She said she and Mr. Moore loved babies and would take good care of Jon. Mrs. Moore thought that Jon would feel special about Karli even if they could not live together. Karli's eyes filled with tears. Mrs. Moore put her arm around her. Mr. Thomas said it was time to go. Karli held Jon and cried her eyes out until Mr. Moore suggested that Karli put him in his crib. Karli placed him gently in the crib, pulled up the soft blankets and whispered, "Don't forget me and mom." Jon snoozed peacefully.

Back in the car, they headed to the Evans home. After about fifteen minutes, they arrived at another house. Ms. Evans was in her robe and looked ridiculous with a bunch of curlers in her hair. She seemed thrilled to see Karli, and Karli thought to herself, "This lady doesn't know me—how could she be so happy to see me?"

Mr. Thomas introduced her to Ms. Christine Evans and said she had two daughters who were sleeping. One was ten and the other was sixteen. He told Ms. Evans about how Karli came to be with her, about Jon and the importance of sibling visitation.

Karli was really tired. She was sick of Mr. Thomas saying things she did not understand. "What is sibling visitation?" she blurted out.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Karli! I have been using words you don't understand. It's been a long day. *Sibling* means brothers and sisters. *Visitation* means having visits. I'm talking about how it is important that you get to see Jon, even though he lives in a different foster home," said Mr. Thomas.

"What's a foster home?" Karli asked.

"A foster home is where a family takes care of kids when their own parents can't. A foster parent takes care of you until you are ready to go home." said Mr. Thomas.

"I'm ready to go home now. I want to see my brother," Karli wailed.

"Let's call the Moores in the morning and see about a visit. You know, it's awfully late and I'd like to show you your room. Could we talk more tomorrow, Mr. Thomas?" asked Ms. Evans.

Mr. Thomas agreed and left the trash bag with a few of Karli's clothes in it. He said she would be back soon. Ms. Evans took Karli upstairs and showed her the bedroom, whispering so she would not wake up the girls. She handed Karli a pair of pajamas, a clean washcloth, and underwear and suggested that she take a bath, then come down to the kitchen.

Karli felt better after the bath, but she was really tired. She came down to the kitchen where Ms. Evans took her dirty clothes, saying she would wash them. Ms. Evans had made some apple

tea in a real teapot and had poured two steaming mugs. Karli had never tasted apple tea but it smelled good. She couldn't believe she was having a tea party with some lady she never met before, wearing someone else's pajamas and underwear at 2:00 in the morning. She wished her mom were there.

Ms. Evans adjusted one of her curlers and sipped her tea. Karli was glad that she didn't ask a bunch of dumb questions. Karli drank the warm tea and realized she was completely worn out.

"Can I go to bed?" she asked.

"Let's go on up and I'll tuck you in," answered Ms. Evans with a yawn.

Karli couldn't remember the last time anyone tucked her in and was about to tell Ms. Evans she didn't need help, but she was so tired she didn't say anything. Ms. Evans covered her up, gave her a light pat on the back, and said, "Call me if you need me." Karli was so tired she couldn't worry anymore about Jon or her mom or what had happened today. She fell asleep.

Chapter 3

The sounds of the girls getting ready for school woke Karli up, and for a moment she couldn't remember where she was and reached for Jon's warm body beside her. He wasn't there. Then she remembered where she was.

"Hi, I'm Melissa and I'm ten."

"I'm Stacie and I'm sixteen."

Melissa had long brown hair pulled back in an elastic band and soft brown eyes. Karli liked her right away. Stacie was cool and reserved and seemed to be preoccupied with her hair.

"We have to go to school so we'll see you later," they said, adding, "Mom said you can sleep longer if you want."

Karli got up and went to the kitchen where she could hear Ms. Evans humming. Ms. Evans smiled at her and said, "How about some breakfast? I have waffles, poptarts, bagels, or cereal." Karli had never had so many choices at breakfast. She was confused for a minute. She knew how to fix poptarts, so she asked for those. Ms. Evans served her a warm poptart and a glass of milk. She felt like she was in a restaurant.

"Shouldn't I be going to school?" she asked Ms. Evans.

"Yes, but you're going to have to go to a new school, the one Melissa goes to. Mr. Thomas has to fill out some papers before you go. I thought today we would buy you some more clothes and things, then you can come to work with me for a while. I washed the clothes you brought with you, so you can get dressed after breakfast. Oh, let's call Mrs. Moore first and see about Jon."

Karli felt sad that she would not see her teacher, Ms. Blake, anymore. Ms. Blake had always been nice. She didn't have time to think more about this, because Ms. Evans dialed the phone and had a brief talk with one of the Moores before she handed the phone to her saying, "She wants to talk to you."

"Hello," said Karli.

"Hi, Karli. Jon is doing fine. He slept until 6:00 this morning, then had a bottle and some cereal. He cried a little at first, but my husband is a real clown and soon Jon felt more comfortable with us. It would be good for him to have a big picture of you. Could you come over tomorrow afternoon to visit, and we'll take some pictures of both of you? Ms. Evans said it would be all right."

"Sure!" said Karli.

Ms. Evans took her to a department store she had never been to and bought her more stuff than she had ever owned: clothes, underwear, a coat, a purse, things to style her hair. She wondered who was paying for all of this stuff and what her mother would think about it. She felt really happy with so many nice things and enjoyed the time with Ms. Evans. They went to McDonald's for lunch before they headed to the beauty shop where Ms. Evans worked. Karli sat in a chair while Ms. Evans styled and cut hair. The other ladies were nice to her and seemed not to mind her being there, since she was so quiet.

When they were in the car on the way home, Karli asked if she could call her auntie and grandma to see about her mom. Ms. Evans said that would be fine. Ms. Evans told Karli she was not trying to take her mom's place, but she *was* going to take care of her until things were straightened out with her mom.

Back at home, Melissa and Stacie were doing homework. They stopped working to admire Karli's clothes. Karli couldn't figure out why they didn't seem jealous. Karli asked if she could help make dinner, but Ms. Evans said she didn't need help. Karli didn't know what to do. At home, she would be going to the store, making dinner, and taking care of Jon. Ms. Evans suggested she make her phone calls to her family. Both her aunts' and her grandmother's

phones were disconnected. Karli started to cry. How would her mom know where she and Jon were?

Ms. Evans stopped what she was doing and asked Karli, "What's the matter?" Karli told her about her aunts' and grandma's numbers not working, probably because they couldn't pay the phone bill, and her worries about finding her mother. Ms. Evans said that they would need to talk to Mr. Thomas about all of this, because it was his job to find out where Karli's mother was and to let her know what had happened. Mr. Thomas was going to call later. Ms. Evans said she changed her mind and would like some help in the kitchen after all. She was impressed with all that Karli knew about cooking. Karli could not get over how much food was in the refrigerator and the pantry. She asked Ms. Evans if they were rich.

"Why do you ask that, Karli?" Ms. Evans laughed.

"Well, you have so much food in the fridge and you bought me all these things and you have a nice car," said Karli.

"I don't think of myself as rich, but we are thankful for what we have. I have a job that pays for the things we have and it's a good job. I am guessing that your mom has had some money troubles, so you are not used to what we have. I hope you can enjoy it while you are here," said Ms. Evans.

They had a nice supper. Everyone sat at the table and talked about their day. Karli was stunned that the family ate together. She also couldn't believe that Ms. Evans had stayed awake all day. Her mom and aunts and grandma always took naps during the day. It was like being in a TV show with those nice families where everyone gets along and has nice things. Though Karli missed Jon and her mom terribly, she felt welcome here.

Chapter 4

Mr. Thomas ended up stopping by instead of calling. He said he decided to stop by because Karli had been so upset when he dropped her off. He told Karli he had not found her mother yet. He had gone to her grandmother's house and told her grandmother what happened. Mr. Thomas asked her grandmother to have her mother call "Social Services," the place where he worked, when she got home. Mr. Moore then went to her aunts' house and left them a note saying the same thing, since her aunts were not home and their phone was not working. He said that when her mother called his office, he would set up a time to meet with her and discuss grownup things. Then he could set up a time for her mom to see Karli and Jon.

"But, can't I just go home when you find her?" asked Karli.

"It's not that easy, Karli. When a parent does not do what other grownups think they should do to take care of their kids, then the parent has to talk to a judge about getting the children home. A judge is a person who went to school a long time to learn how to make important decisions. The judge wants the mom to say how she will do a better job at taking care of her kids. This means that the mom does not leave the kids alone, that the mom has enough food and clothes and heat and electricity for the family, and that the mom makes sure all the older kids get to school. I know you love your mom and that you felt you could take care of Jon yourself, but there are rules about *adults* taking care of kids, not kids taking care of other kids. So we find your mom, set up some grownup meetings, set up times where you see your mom for a few hours at my office, and you stay here until your mom can get her act together."

Karli could barely make any sense of all this. She didn't know what to say.

"You will start in your new school the day after tomorrow," said Mr. Thomas, "and I will visit you once a week to see how you are doing. You can call me anytime if there is a problem. But I hope you will feel comfortable talking with Ms. Evans about things that are bothering you."

Karli had nothing to say. She did not know what to think. Fortunately, Ms. Evans spoke up and said, "Karli, why don't you go play video games with Melissa while Mr. Thomas and I talk a bit." Karli was relieved to go. She had had enough of talking to grownups.

She found Melissa in the family room and said, "Your mom said we could play video games."

"Cool, what game do you want to play?" Melissa smiled.

Karli didn't know much about video games, because she had only played a few times at her cousin's house.

"You pick, okay?" Karli said.

They played until it was time to get ready for bed. The girls talked in their pajamas for a while about things they liked to do, to watch on TV, and stuff. Ms. Evans came in to say goodnight and Karli felt like one of the family, but she still had trouble getting to sleep without Jon and couldn't stop thinking about her mom. How long would it take her to find them? Karli cried herself to sleep long after Melissa and Stacie were snoring softly.

Chapter 5

The morning seemed to go by quickly at the beauty shop. Ms. Evans gave Karli a few jobs, like washing curlers and putting hair products on the shelves. Together they ate the lunch that Ms. Evans had packed this morning. Karli liked not having to worry about where her next meal came from. After lunch, Ms. Evans styled one more lady's hair, then they went to the Moores. Karli could feel her heart beating hard, because she was so excited to be seeing Jon.

Jon was playing on a blanket on the family room rug when they arrived. Karli barely said hello to Mrs. Moore before she scooped Jon up in her arms. He giggled delightedly and made happy gurgling sounds. They played for a few minutes and didn't pay any attention to Mrs. Moore and Ms. Evans, who talked quietly on the other side of the room. Mrs. Moore had one camera, the kind that takes pictures that come out right away, and another camera where you get the film developed later. She took a lot of pictures while they played, then a few shots of Karli and Jon alone. She gave Karli some of the pictures, which Karli put in her new purse.

Mrs. Moore had a snack prepared, so they went into the kitchen. She had a high chair for Jon and he seemed to like sitting in it. They did not have a high chair at home, so this was new for Jon. Karli had to admit that even though she missed Jon, he seemed happy and Mrs. Moore was nice. Jon didn't smile at Mrs. Moore the way he did at her, but he snuggled into her when she carried him. Karli wondered if he was going to forget mom. Karli played some more with Jon and then it was time to go. Mr. Moore came home from work at the end of the visit. Karli got to see all the silly things he did to amuse Jon and she couldn't help laughing. She

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wondered if things would have been different if her own dad hadn't left them.

On the way home, Ms. Evans said, "I heard you crying last night. I want you to know that you can come to me if you're sad, even if it's late at night. Sometimes it helps to have some company when you're missing someone. I'm a pretty good listener."

"Thanks," said Karli.

When they got back to Ms. Evans' house, there was a message on the answering machine from Mr. Thomas. He said Karli's mom had called him and they would meet tomorrow to set up a visiting time. He would call them back when he knew more. Karli felt relieved to know her mom was all right.

Chapter 6

As Melissa and Karli walked to school, Karli had a bad feeling in her stomach. She had been to a lot of schools, because her mom would get kicked out of her apartment for having too many people coming in and out, or because she couldn't pay the rent. Karli hated it every time. The only difference this time was that Melissa was at her side. They would be in different classes, because Karli was in the third grade and Melissa was in the fourth.

Her new teacher, Mrs. Lewis, made her feel less nervous. She had this quiet way that made her feel like she had known her before. She assigned Karli a desk and locker and gave her a pile of school supplies and books to arrange in her desk. Karli missed her old teacher, Ms. Blake, and wished she could have said goodbye to her. As they waited for the other students, Mrs. Lewis asked her to help put worksheets on each student's desk. Karli was relieved to have something to do.

Soon, the other children arrived, looking at her curiously. Mrs. Lewis introduced her, "Students, this is Karli Stanford, who has transferred to our school. Let's make her welcome. Judy, I would like you to be Karli's 'buddy' so she can learn her way around the school and how we do things."

At recess, Judy asked her where she lived and Karli realized she did not know the house number, so she just mentioned the street and changed the subject. Judy was telling her about her parents and stupid sisters and brothers, as she called them, seeming to expect that Karli would talk about her family. Karli realized that by calling her foster mother "Ms. Evans" everyone would know she was a foster child.

Chapter 7

Mr. Thomas picked her up after school for her visit with her mom. Then they drove over to the Moore's to get Jon. Karli sat in the back seat next to his car seat, holding his little hand. Mr. Thomas said they were going to the building next to his office building, which was called the Family Visiting Center. He said there were rooms for kids to visit with parents. At the center, Mr. Thomas signed a book with their names and led the children to a room with old furniture and some beat-up toys. They waited a long time and Karli was starting to worry that her mother wasn't coming. Sometimes her mom would be headed somewhere, like to go to the store, and she never made it because she found a friend who would buy her a few beers. Karli tried to push these thoughts out of her mind and concentrate on Jon. He looked adorable. Ms. Moore had him dressed in a new outfit with tiny tennis shoes. Karli was wearing new clothes too, one of the outfits Ms. Evans bought her.

"Sorry I'm late... Karli, Jon...." her mother entered the room and hugged them both. Karli all of a sudden felt strange around her mom. It seemed like a long time since she had seen her, but it was only a few days. She started to cry. Her mom said, "What have you people been doing to my daughter. She's bawling like a baby!"

"She has been well taken care of, but she misses you," said Mr. Thomas.

"Are you all right, baby?" mom asked Karli. Karli nodded and tried to stop crying.

"Look at you two, all dressed up like rich people!" said mom. It made Karli feel guilty about her new clothes. She wished she had something new for her mom to wear. Jon seemed happy to see mom, and Karli could see he had not forgotten her. Karli sat

close to her mom, who had Jon on her lap, while Mr. Thomas talked to her. Mr. Thomas then excused himself to make a phone call and left the three of them alone.

"I'm gonna get you back, honey. I kinda messed up and I didn't know that Jon was sick. I have to go to court and ask the judge to give me another chance, but I can't see the judge for a few months. They say I need to go to a class for people who drink and party too much. And they say I need another class about how to make sure we have food in the house, and electricity, and heat. I don't like this Mr. Thomas. Tell me really, have they been treating you right?"

Karli told her about Ms. Evans and her family, and about the Moores. She told her about her new school.

"When can we come home, mom?" asked Karli.

"I don't know exactly when, honey. They won't let me take you home until I go to the classes. You do good in school and call grandma's if you need to talk to me," answered mom.

"Grandma's phone isn't working. Neither is Auntie Jean's," said Karli.

Mr. Thomas came back to the room and said, "Time to go. Mrs. Moore came to pick up Jon so she could meet you and tell you how he is doing. Next visit you will meet Ms. Evans." Mrs. Moore came in the room, and mom looked at her like she hated her. But Mrs. Moore was nice as could be, talking about Jon's schedule, what he was eating, and how he was sleeping. Then she handed her mom a bunch of pictures of Jon and Karli. Right then, mom seemed to stop hating her.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Moore. You can't imagine what this is like for me. Losing my kids, finding out they are with strangers..." mom started to cry. Karli hadn't seen her mom cry in a long time. It made her wonder how her mom was going to ever

"get her act together." Karli started to cry, too. Mr. Thomas gave them both tissues and told them it was normal to have painful feelings about saying good-bye. Karli felt like someone was tearing her heart out of her chest. Somehow, she hugged and kissed her mom and Jon good-bye and was back in the car with Mr. Thomas. Karli didn't really understand why she couldn't go home with her mom today. As bad as she felt, she knew once she got to Ms. Evans that things would somehow be better. Ms. Evans seemed to know what to say and do all the time.

At home, Karli went to her room and Ms. Evans left her alone for a while. Then she came up to talk to her.

"I don't know what it's like to be taken away from your mama and brother. And I don't know what it's like to go visit your mama and have to say good-bye again. But I got to figure it doesn't feel good. Do you want to talk about it?" asked Ms. Evans.

"Not now," said Karli. Ms. Evans reached over to hug her and Karli let her.

"When you're ready, come on down and do your homework with the girls," said Ms. Evans.

Karli hugged her pillow, thinking about mom and Jon. She could smell dinner cooking and hear the girls talking in the kitchen. A lot of strange things had happened in just a few days. But somehow Karli knew Ms. Evans wouldn't let her down. She decided to go downstairs to do her homework and almost bumped into Ms. Evans as she left her room. They both laughed and Karli said, "Do you think I could call you Aunt Christine?" Ms. Evans smiled and gave Karli a hug.

Part II:
Intervention Strategies for Foster Parents and Helping Professionals

This section identifies challenges arising from the important concerns that children being placed in foster homes have. These challenges are then answered with intervention strategies for foster parents and clinical professionals. A resource list of publications, websites, and organizations relevant to foster care follows.

Challenge #1

When a child is placed in foster care, a series of unpredictable events occur.

Intervention Strategy

Children thrive in environments that are safe and predictable. The foster child has been removed from an unsafe environment, but is caught in a maelstrom of perplexing events. In the story, Karli is confused about why she is not at home, what Mr. Thomas (the social worker) is doing, and what will happen next. A study of children in foster care revealed that 40% of children found the circumstances of their initial placement confusing [Johnson et al. 1995].

It may not be possible to change aspects of the child welfare system to make placements more predictable for children. It is possible, however, to give children developmentally appropriate information about what is going to happen. In *When Do I Go Home?* the social worker is not immediately aware of Karli's confusion, because he is busy trying to follow agency procedures (for example, medical triage and locating a foster home placement). When the worker realizes that Karli is scared and upset, he takes the time to explain concepts in words a 9-year-old child could understand. Mr. Thomas did not attempt to explain the placement to the infant, Jon, because he did not have the language skills to comprehend.

Challenge #2

Foster parents, social workers, and other staff feel negatively toward the biological parent, because he or she has been neglectful or abusive. The child sees nothing wrong with the aspects of poor parenting that led authorities to remove the child.

Intervention Strategy

Making negative statements about the child's parents in front of her will not contribute to positive adjustment. Though we want to be honest about the reasons the child was removed, it promotes normal child development for children to view their parents in some positive ways, regardless of neglect or abuse. In situations where the child has lived in deplorable conditions, well-meaning adults are unlikely to convince a child that this was bad for her. In fact, in one research study half of the foster children surveyed rated their parents as nonproblematic [Kufeldt et al. 1995].

In the story, Karli defends her mother and communicates her acceptance of being Jon's primary caregiver. She is used to purchasing food, cooking for the family, and taking care of her drug-dependent mother. A strategy that works well under these circumstances is to point out in concrete ways what the parent needed to do differently, such as "There was no electricity or hot water, and children need to live in a home that has these." Avoid discussion of serious inadequacies of the biological parent in front of the child.

Challenge #3

The child is accustomed to raising siblings.

Intervention Strategy

Be sensitive to the child's role and responsibilities in the family. If siblings are to be separated, try to facilitate relationships among foster parents, so that the children can retain important sibling relationships, especially in cases where the older sibling was the primary caregiver.

In the story, Ms. Evans and Mr. and Mrs. Moore (the foster parents) developed a cooperative relationship that enhanced the adjustment of both children in foster care. The Moores were sensitive about Karli's history of raising Jon herself and were respectful of the children's close relationship.

The child may feel guilty about abandoning the primary caregiver role. In the story, Karli worried that her mom would be angry if she did not carry out instructions to take care of Jon. Biological parents commonly tell older children to look out for younger children. In families where parents are neglectful, these admonitions can be even stronger. Children need reassurance that it is all right for them to let someone else to take care of that sibling. Mrs. Moore allows Karli to put Jon to bed before she leaves for her own foster home and tells her soothingly that she will take good care of him.

Providing the siblings with pictures of one another is a great idea. In the story, Mrs. Moore tells Karli over the phone that she intends to take pictures of them both, so they will have them in their different foster homes. This occurred shortly after placement in the story, which was ideal timing. The exchange of sibling photographs gives the child a clear message that the adults understand the importance of the relationship. Additionally, Mrs. Moore provided a brief report by phone about Jon's feeding, sleep-

ing, and social adjustment to decrease Karli's anxiety about Jon's welfare.

In *When Do I Go Home?* the social worker would probably have placed Karli and Jon in the same home if he had had this option. A nice discussion of factors to consider in placing siblings together, versus apart, is contained in Hager [1988]. Hager also reviews other aspects of sibling relationships to consider in foster care.

It is also necessary to help the older child learn the role of a child in the family. Mr. Thomas started this teaching by telling Karli that someone else would be changing Jon's diapers. Karli's foster mother, Ms. Evans, has the primary job of teaching Karli how a child acts in a family when she does not care for younger siblings: she can play, do homework, be nurtured by an adult. Karli quickly adapted to and accepted this role in a way other foster children might not be able to.

Challenge #4

The child hears adult conversation about him/her.

Intervention Strategy

Let's face it. We're not perfect. Sometimes children hear us talking about them, or they eavesdrop, or maybe, like in the story, it's late at night and there is no one else available to watch the children while a placement is found. Karli was reading papers on the desk of the social worker, Mr. Thomas. Sometimes children read papers from their file when the social worker leaves the room. The best thing to do is explain why you said what you said or what is on the papers in words the child can understand. Notice how Mr. Thomas explained terms like "sibling" to Karli.

Challenge #5

It is not clear where the parents are when the child is removed.

Intervention Strategy

Mr. Thomas, the social worker, told Karli that he did not know where to find her mother, but later said that efforts to establish lines of communication were under way. Any child can go into a tailspin if adults say they have no idea how to locate the parent. Children are likely to make a poor adjustment and possibly disrupt the placement if they are excessively worried about the biological parent. Experienced social workers and foster parents know that older children often have ideas about where the parent might be, and may have memorized key phone numbers, which are not a part of the case record.

In the story, Karli knew the numbers for extended family members and was alarmed when she learned that their phones had been disconnected. It is equally possible that the child will not disclose this information for fear of upsetting the parent who has told them not to give out the numbers. In either case, no matter how challenging it may be to find the parent(s), it is important to reassure the child that efforts are under way to find them. In the story, Mr. Thomas outlines specifically what he is doing to try to find the mother. He also talks about steps that will happen before Karli and Jon can go home.

Note: The common social work practice of creating a Life Book for the child can address these concerns. The Life Book is an album or notebook containing documentation about key aspects of the child's stay in foster care. The Life Book is meant to go home with the child or to travel with her to the next placement (see Aust [1981]).

Challenge #6

Changing schools.

Intervention Strategy

One of the first things Karli worried about was missing school. Many children change schools when they enter the foster care system. Though nationwide efforts toward neighborhood foster care are ongoing, the likelihood of a school transition is still quite high. In addition, it is likely that the foster child has changed schools frequently, due to family instability. When children in foster care are surveyed, most report that changing schools was difficult, particularly making new friends [Johnson et al. 1995]. It is important not to underestimate the significance of the former teacher-foster child relationship. School can be a tremendous refuge for children with a neglectful and/or abusive home life. School may be the cleanest, kindest place the child goes, and where he or she receives the most nurturance (emotional and nutritional through the breakfast and lunch programs). If there is a way to contact the former teacher to say good-bye to the newly placed foster child, this would be optimal. A picture of that teacher with a handwritten note would also be meaningful to the child.

Give some thought to the new school transition. Could the child meet the new teacher before entering the class on the first day there? Karli portrays the awkwardness and uncertainty of foster children entering a new class in the middle of the school year. Could the child meet another student before starting school? In the story, Karli is fortunate to attend school with the foster parent's daughter.

Challenge #7

The child is wary about meeting new people.

Intervention Strategy

Karli's caution in meeting new people the night she was placed is normal. If foster parents are too effusive in greeting the child, this could be confusing. Notice that Ms. Evans approached Karli warmly, but did not expect intimacy. She did not pepper her with questions, but instead attended to Karli's immediate needs: where she would sleep, clean clothes, telling her who lives in the home. Ms. Evans gradually introduced her to the family routine, starting out with washing up before bed and chatting with the parent before bed. In the story, the foster mother takes time to spend with Karli to get to know her, time when her own daughters would not be there needing her attention and time. This time investment pays off in the story, as Karli is able to begin forming a relationship with Ms. Evans and her daughters.

Challenge #8

Cultural differences in food, clothing, and customs.

Intervention Strategy

Karli was not used to the infant car seat, having a choice of breakfast foods, having a closetful of clothes, or a family eating supper together. Karli responded to these differences by making comments or asking questions. Both Mr. Thomas and Ms. Evans were straightforward in responding to her comments and questions without making Karli feel bad.

Challenge #9

The child experiences conflicting feelings about visitation.

Intervention Strategy

It is normal for foster children to experience conflicting feelings about family visitation. The visits do not generally take place in the biological family home, which is the place children are accustomed to interacting with their parents. Children are transported to a place like the Family Visiting Center in the story by a social worker who visits the child, but does not spend as much time with the child as the foster family. Biological parents are often troubled by these circumstances along with the obvious loss of their children and need to follow a plan to get the children back. When children come to visits in new clothing or appearing different in some manner, biological parents may react in a critical way: the mother in the story was sarcastic about the children's new clothing, teasing that they looked like "rich people."

Biological parents may resent the foster parents and may communicate this in various ways that create a loyalty conflicts. Social workers or therapists should address these concerns directly with the biological parent. It is difficult for children and parents to say good-bye at the end of the visit. The parents worry about how the children are being treated in foster care. The children worry about their parents in between visits. Staff supervising visits can help to ease these transitions by establishing good-bye rituals with input from the biological family.

In the story, the children do not present as emotionally disturbed. Children who display emotional and behavioral disorders, however, are more likely to have difficulty at visitation time. In *When Do I Go Home?* we are also dealing with a child who appears capable of developing trust in her foster parent and with

a foster parent who does not press for too much intimacy too soon. This sets the stage for the foster parent to support the child regarding visitation issues.

Publications

Aust, P. A. (1981). Using the life book in treatment of children in placement. *Child Welfare, 60*, 535-560.

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Marcus, R. F. (1991). The attachments of children in foster care. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs, 117*(4), 365-394.

Websites

There are some excellent websites that offer a variety of resources for foster family and mental health workers who are involved in foster care and treatment foster care. Here is a partial list of sites. If you do not have a home computer, many public libraries have computer stations where you can learn to use the Internet.

http://www.yahoo.com/society_and_culture/families/parenting/foster_parenting
This page lists websites related to foster care.

http://www.designport.com/fosterweb/
A foster family website for parents and children. It features a kids' page, a parents' page, a list of foster parent resources by geographical region, and a chat room.

http://www.westworld.com/~barbara/
The Foster Parent Community home page, which includes articles, a foster parent association directory, resource list, and a chat room.

http://www.focis.com/homepage.htm
The Bluewater Family Support Services page. The organization markets software and technical support for programs relating to foster care program administration. It also markets training materials and has a book list and a chat room.

http://www.ica.net/pages/sharyn
The Canadian Foster Parent Home Page includes a chat room and e-mail exchange lists and also sells software for foster care program management.

Organizations

The Foster Family-Based Treatment Association
1415 Queen Anne Road
Teaneck, NJ 07666
800/414-3382
http://www. ffta.org

The National Foster Parent Association (NFPA)
P. O. Box 81
Alpha, OH 45301-0081
800/557-5238
http://ericps.ed.uiuc.edu

Children's Defense Fund
25 E Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
202/628-8787
http://www.childrensdefense.crg

You can locate your State Foster Parent Association by asking a licensed social worker or by looking at the Foster Parents Care website, http://www.fostercare.org.

About the Author

Sally G. Hoyle, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and writer who specializes in assessment and treatment of children and families. Currently, Dr. Hoyle is project director of a research study on foster care. She lectures locally and nationally on child mental health topics and has a private practice in Beachwood, Ohio.

Karli and her baby brother have been taken from their home in the middle of the night. She doesn't know where her mother is, and now she and her brother are being placed in separate foster homes! The first section of the book, *When Do I Go Home? Intervention Strategies for Foster Parents and Helping Professionals* tells the story of Karli and her brother Jon. The second part identifies the challenges that arise when children like Karli and Jon are taken into an unfamiliar system. The author's practical intervention strategies will help foster parents and other professionals meet the needs of these children with sensitivity and compassion.

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ISBN 0-87868-728-9